

THE WINTER SOLSTICE

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SOCIAL LIFE & CUSTOMS

What a happy circumstance it is that Jesus' birthday was arranged to fall at the winter solstice. The days are then dark, short, and winter is beginning to growl in earnest. The edge of night has crept up into our afternoons, the sun, when out, rides a low arc across the sky.

It happens that these depressing conditions affect us but little, we have other things to do. With Thanksgiving behind us we plunge into a stack of greeting cards and ponder the gifts for our loved ones -- the days are full.

As the weeks pass, the tempo accelerates, the houses blaze with twinkling tree lights, carols and bells fill the air. Good cheer sweeps the homes, the streets and the hearts of all.

The climax comes; the children are in ecstasy; youth is immersed in gaiety; the parents exhausted, but happy and the aged with warmed hearts look on and think of Christmas past.

It is the solstice that brings the darkness so necessary for the brilliance of the lights. Let us take a brief look at the solstice, what it is and why:

The earth in yearly movement around the sun, does not stand erect with its axis pointing upward -- push a knitting needle through the center of an orange; the north and south poles are shown and the needle is an illustration of the imaginary line around which the earth turns each day making day and night. No, no, the axis does not point directly up, but with the earth, leans at an angle of 23.5 degrees all the year, every year. And what is more and the crux of the matter is that the axis points in the same direction throughout the whole revolution around the sun. This being so, it is evident that at one point in the orbit the earth is leaning, directly toward the sun. Its northern hemisphere is bathed in sunshine. It is the summer solstice.

Six months later, at the opposite end of the orbit, the earth is leaning directly away from the sun. The northern hemisphere is in total shadow in the north polar regions, and according to latitude, a low sun with long nights and short days prevail. It is the winter solstice. Dec. 21-22 and Christmas time.

Back in Duxbury's seafaring days one of her young ladies, who had sailed with her father since childhood, when at sea, relieved her father of the duties of navigator. At 90 years of age she delighted in telling of that "springtime of her life." High among her reminiscences she described a Christmas in Europe.

The ship, Frederick Tudor, was discharging in Hamburg, Germany, about Dec. 12. The family moved ashore to a hotel only to find the city given over to the gay festivities of a Christmas a fortnight away. The houses were all alight and streets ablaze. Jostling crowds were laughing and friendly. After months at sea all these celebrations were especially enjoyable to the strangers from Duxbury.

The ship sailed a week before Christmas on a short but dangerous passage to Cardiff, Wales. A northeasterly gale carried them quickly through the long nights of that high latitude, across the wild North Sea, through the crowded, narrow Straits of Dover and down the English Channel. When the Captain tried to round Lands End and turn up the Irish Sea, the wind was ahead. He was obliged to turn back and lie "off and on" off the Cornish Coast. He was in a hazardous situation -- lying in the shipping lanes, hampered by the darkness and the uncertain proximity of that notorious coast. Fatigued by anxiety and discomfort the family ate in the Frederick Tudor celebrated Christmas with a washed out cook's galley. In 2 weeks after persistent bad easterly weather, the wind shifted giving the exhausted and haggard master a chance to round Lands End and up into the Bristol Estuary. The ship was tied up safely a few miles below Cardiff.

It was the day of Twelfth-Night. In the early evening the American Consul, whom the family had met before, drove down from the city with an invitation for Miss Nellie to attend a Twelfth-Night party. Those hospitable Welsh people took in the stranger as one of their own, giving her a rare evening of music and gaiety. It was topped off by a royal spread of delicacies. At midnight Miss Nellie was climbing a rope ladder over the side of the ship. Christmas 1869 was over.

By Twelfth Night the parties have subsided, the tinsel and trees come down and we brace ourselves for the onslaught of winter. Be not disheartened, the earth has moved onward some 15 degrees leaving the solstice astern; the sun responds by turning northward. The days are perceptively longer and though the nor'wester will roar, it is cheering to know that below the southern, spring is creeping northward.

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